

Sarah Horner, *Pioneer Press*

Sen. John McCain called out the Maplewood project in a tweet against federal spending earmarks.

"\$1,000,000 for improvements to a pond in Maplewood, MN - those are some lucky frogs," McCain, an Arizona Republican, wrote in a Twitter posting recycled in a New York Times story this week.

Now that project and thousands like it across the country are finding themselves short on cash. Earmarks, long used by lawmakers to fund local projects, were banned for the remainder of the 2011 congressional session by the U.S. Senate last week. The move follows a similar vote in the House in January and comments against them by President Barack Obama in his State of the Union address.

"This is one of the consequences of eliminating this kind of federal investment in local communities," said Bill Harper, chief of staff for Rep. Betty McCollum, the St. Paul Democrat whose office originally requested the \$1 million federal earmark later called into question by McCain.

"Senator McCain is completely ignorant of this project and the value of this project to the environment, to transportation and to the quality of life in Maplewood and the surrounding community," Harper said.

The project in question aims to clean up Maplewood's Gerten Pond, a 35-acre wetland area northeast of Minnesota 36 and U.S. 61, according to Chuck Ahl, assistant city manager for Maplewood. The pond discharges into Keller Lake, which is listed as an impaired lake in Minnesota prone to flooding Minnesota after heavy rainstorms.

Expanding the pond would help clean up Keller Lake and solve the flooding problems, a critical step in the city's and the Minnesota Department of Transportation's efforts to get rid of a traffic signal at Minnesota 36 and English Street, one of the last remaining traffic signals on the highway clogging up traffic.

"You never want to flood a roadway where cars are going 55 miles an hour," Ahl said.

The pond project is estimated to cost \$14 million, with a variety of funding streams, including the \$1 million in earmark dollars, originally expected to foot the bill. With the new ban on earmarks, Maplewood Mayor Will Rossbach said the city will have to come up with a new plan for the restoration, which was slated to take place in 2013.

"Maplewood doesn't have a million spare just laying around for this, so now we're going to have to seek other funding," Rossbach said. "My guess is it will delay the project."

McCain's office said his December tweet was taking aim at the earmark process, not Maplewood in particular.

"Senator McCain isn't arguing the merits of these programs - it's how they are funded and added to bills in the dark of the night with little or no explanation," said Brooke Buchanan, communications director for the senator.

Still, Harper said McCain shouldn't talk about things he doesn't know about firsthand.

"He may know what happens in Arizona, but he needs to stop meddling in Minnesota because it is beyond his ability to comprehend," Harper said.

Harper added that McCollum would continue to work with Maplewood to try to find new funding sources for the Gerten Pond project.